

Follow the Lamb

A sermon by John Strommen on John 1:35-51 Jan. 7, 2018

John calls Jesus “the Lamb of God,” and soon John’s own disciples have left John and are following the Lamb of God. The language here is very relational, about following, remaining together, going on a journey together. In all this is the conviction that Jesus, the Lamb of God, will lead them through the perils of sin and death, through the brokenness and confusion of this life, to a life that only the Messiah can offer.

My father-in-law, Paul Almquist, who was a pastor and is now retired, once told me a very unique and special story about a lamb. Back when Paul was the senior pastor of Minnetonka Lutheran, one of his parishioners was a certain 99 year old man named Stephan Egge, a man whom Paul held in the highest regard. Stephan had grown up in the mountains of Norway and as a young man, he immigrated to America.

Stephan was dying of cancer and had only weeks to live, so Paul met with him to plan his funeral and to reflect on life a bit. As they were talking, Stephan said, “Pastor, I want to tell you a story from my childhood that I have never told anyone else in my entire life.” Paul was all ears.

When he was 12 or 13 years old, Stephan would spend his summer days taking care of his dad’s sheep. Early each summer morning, he would take the sheep high up into the mountain meadows to graze for the day. It was perhaps a few thousand feet up in elevation. And if you’ve ever seen the mountains in Norway, you know how steep and treacherous they are. There was a very careful route they had to follow to get up and down, with some variations as they couldn’t keep going to the same spot every time.

Well, one particular day in the late afternoon it was almost time to bring the sheep back down the mountain, when Stephan noticed some very dark clouds rolling in over the mountains. In the mountains, bad weather can come up very suddenly without warning. Now one of the primary jobs of a shepherd is to watch for weather and keep the herd out of harms’ way, so Stephan quickly mobilized the herd to make their way down.

They hadn’t gone very far when a thick fog blanketed them, making visibility almost impossible for Stephan. And unfortunately, they had yet to even reach the dangerous portion of their journey. Stephan was extremely frightened and feared for the lives of his sheep – not to mention his own life! One wrong move, and you could literally fall off of this mountain. Stephan prayed fervently to God to take care of them. He wasn’t a particularly religious boy, but people do get religious in a hurry in these situations.

Stephan also knew he had to lead the sheep, because it’s not like with other animals that can instinctively find their way down; indeed it is true that sheep are followers. They won’t lead.

Now Stephan was concerned in particular about one little lamb that with them. Afraid the little guy might not keep up or wander off or something. So he tied a rope around the lamb’s neck, so that could personally lead the lamb through the tough part.

Well, it didn't work. Stephan couldn't see a thing, he couldn't lead anybody; he was totally uncertain about where to go, and so he stopped completely, simply paralyzed by the situation, and prayed some more. At this point, he was truly afraid that he would die. Remember, this is only an adolescent here.

And then a most unusual thing happened. The little lamb with the rope around its neck stepped out in front of the sheep and Stephan and started walking down the mountain, picking its way carefully. The sheep followed and so did Stephan, holding onto the rope. It appeared to Stephan that the lamb was following a reasonable course, so they all focused on the lamb who led them, for 5 minutes, then for a half hour, then an hour and half, through the dense fog; through the storm that raged; along the cliffs and chutes, the rock slides. No, even adult sheep never lead, let alone a lamb. But this one did, and he led them all the way down the mountain.

When they all got to the bottom safely, and symbolically crossed a bridge bringing them completely out of danger, Stephan took the rope off the lamb. He wept and wept and then thanked God for saving his life through that little lamb. He promised God that he would follow his Lord for the rest of his life. And that is just what Stephan did. He focused on the lamb of God for the rest of his life. In my father-in-law's estimation, Stephan was one of the great Christian saints who had ever been in one of his congregations.

When Stephan finished telling this story, his eyes filled with tears. Paul asked him why he had never told anyone until now.

"I knew," said Stephan, "that what happened that day was a miracle, and I was afraid no one would ever believe me." Paul then asked Stephan's permission to tell the story at his funeral, which he did two weeks later.

What Stephan experienced is no less true for us today. We, too, are invited in this life to focus on the lamb and to follow him. And we need this lamb to show us the way. Our journey often becomes foggy and is beset with storms. We cannot see clearly - as individuals and as the church - and yet we often think all we need to do is rely on our knowledge, our skill, our determination. After all, we're creatures of the enlightenment. We are masters of the universe. Faith, however, understands that this is a God thing. We are dependent on the God who is in Jesus, and that's a good thing, because we don't know what we're doing. This is the journey we are on. Our task as Christians is to get up out of chair of detachment and go on a journey - the journey of faith. And to focus on the lamb. The lamb who *takes away* the sin of the world, as John made clear in the verses before. The lamb who is *with us* in the storm. The lamb who *leads us* through the fog and into a life that is generous, hopeful, healing. God has forged a new relationship with us.

And so, John says to two of his disciples, "Look, there is the Lamb of God!" And those disciples don't just say, "cool," they do what? They *follow*. Jesus turns to them and says, "What are you seeking?" to which the disciples say, "Teacher, where are you staying?" Might seem like an odd question, but it means, "we want to go wherever you're going, wherever you're staying." Even the Greek word that gets translated "staying," means something closer to "abiding" or "remaining." And abiding and remaining with Jesus is

what the followers seek and what Jesus offers. And so begins a wonderful but by no means an easy road trip; a journey of faith and life and bearing witness to the God who has joined us and calls us to join him.

Like Stephan, our Norwegian friend, Jesus' disciples encountered many storms and fog shrouded paths where they were invited to trust and follow the lamb. As Christians, we live in a time where things are plenty foggy. What does the fog look like? I think today it looks like uncertainty and fear a lot. The world is uncertain, it is diverse, it has gotten smaller. It is easy to lose your sense of where you belong in it. In the fog of fear and the lack of vision, we can become tribal and unloving and even call it Christian. Yet as the disciples followed the lamb of God it was clear that in fog of life, they were to love their neighbor, to trust that when all else is unclear, love, forgiveness and life eternal are not unclear. They cut through the fog. This is what Christ gives us.

There is also the fog for Christians in this century, no formula for a Christian or a church to follow to be successful. If we're honest in the church, we really don't know what the church is supposed to be and do right now. What remains is to know where to focus and who to follow; to go on a journey together and not stand still. Keep repeating this going on a journey, make it a habit. Our faith is something that is practiced or it withers and dies.

Thanks be to God that the lamb knows the way through the fog. Amen.